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ABSTRACT

Extremists, whether formalists of the New Criticism or of the humanist-moralist tradition, are taken to task in this attempt to combine elements of both in a more pluralistic approach to literary criticism. An analysis of a Frost poem, "Stopping by Woods", is attempted as an illustration of a kind of criticism that seeks to clarify the parts of the poem, to discover the governing principle, and to identify the shaping principle which leads the writer to be concerned with its form. Concluding remarks point out the need to consider the artist as a "maker" and a "shaper", and thus to regard analysis of form as a means of arriving at the literary appreciation which the humanist critics propose. (RL)

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Three Views of Poetic Form*

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HOW SHALL WE TEACH a poem? Although the New Critics have tried to show us that form is everything, there are still certain die-hards among us, critics and teachers alike, who think that content is everything. We are still fighting—in our own characteristic way, of course—the old Victorian battle of Poet-as-Aesthete vs. Poet-as-Prophet. I would like to see, however, whether a balance can be struck, whether the relationship between form and content, art and life, literature and morality may be seen in terms other than those of the usual either-or option.

But first, let us examine how the current battle-lines have been drawn.

I

One of the main anti-New Critical trends at present is created by those who reject formal criticism on moral grounds. Today the voices of some of our most distinguished men of letters are joining in the attack. Formal analysis, says Henri Peyre, with its pedantries of the dissecting-room, threatens to distract us from our real concern with humanistic values.[1] Criticism, says Alfred Kazin, must stop this trifling and reclaim its prophetic voice to speak once again of man's nature and his destiny.[2] Lionel Trilling, one of the most urbane of the anti-formalists, confesses more modestly, in a recent essay on modern literature, that "my own interests lead me to see literary situations as cultural situations, and cultural situations as great elaborate fights about moral issues."[3]

Now, no one wants to deny any critic the privilege of raising whatever questions he wishes about literature. But there are several dangers in this moralist position which Peyre, Kazin, and Trilling have not taken the trouble to avoid. In the first place, in concentrating on the moral aspect of literature, these men make the unwarranted assumption that the moral aspect is the only one—or, at least, the only *important* one—there is. What Trilling, for example, at first disarmingly presents as a personal preference, turns out in fact to be a dogma about the nature and function of literature: a poem is not "a pyramid," he says, but "a howitzer," and one cannot describe a howitzer "without estimating how much *damage* it can do." It seems to me, though, that this is an excessively prescriptive view, for some poems may be pyramids and some may be howitzers, and it is surely a mistake to define one

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[1] "Facing the New Decade," *PMLA*, 76 (1961), 1-6.

[2] "The Function of Criticism Today," *Commentary*, 30 (July-Dec. 1960), 369-78.

[3] "On the Modern Element in Modern Literature," *Partisan Review* 28 (1961), 9-35, esp. 18-20.

in terms of the other. To do so is, in the second place, to trivialize form, to reduce it to a mere wrapping or husk which conceals the real substance within. If a poem is a howitzer and not a pyramid, it naturally follows that a concern with form is a peacetime luxury. But I would suggest that literature should not be so hastily pressed into military uniform. My metaphor suggests that even a howitzer has a form without which it could not work its damage, and a pyramid, when rightly understood, can do as much "damage" in its own way as a howitzer. In order to emphasize life, it is not necessary to minimize form; in order to study a work in its cultural contexts, it is not necessary to assume that it exists for the *sake* of those contexts. The third danger of the moralist position is to make exaggerated claims for the redeeming powers of writers and critics. There is something pathetically grandiose in claiming, as Kazin does, that poets and men of letters can save us. They may have great gifts of insight, but so do other men. And poets and critics may be quite wrong, and often—just as other men are. A man may be very wise, and yet have no literary gift; or he may be a great writer, and yet be quite mistaken in his insights.

Well, then, you must be thinking, the New Critics are just what is wanted here. They are not afraid to concentrate on formal analysis, for they do not define form in such narrow terms. Poetry is one of the most valuable of human activities, not because it embodies—in Trilling's words—the poet's "personal and social will," but rather because, as John Ciardi puts it, it embodies "the experience of the poet's imagination." The poet's ability to deepen and broaden our perceptions is "a civilizing force."[4] As R. W. Stallman says about the aestheticism of the New Critics, "Rightly understood, the principle [of art for art's sake] has tremendous implications."[5] And Cleanth Brooks says, "though the text must provide the ultimate sanction for the meaning of the work, that does not mean that close textual reading is to be conceived of as a sort of verbal piddling. Words open out into the larger symbolizations on all levels."[6] Thus, for Robert Heilman, for example, *King Lear* is "a play about the ways of perceiving truth."[7]

Nothing could be more mistaken, then, than to accuse the New Critics of empty formalism. For their criterion of form is "meaning" itself, and that is, I think, just the trouble. They are no less concerned than our moralists with how literature relates to life, only they go at it in terms of the denotations and connotations of language, of its metaphors, ambiguities, and the like, rather than the poet's personal and social will. Whereas the one group conceives too narrowly of form in its urgent pre-occupation with life, the other group conceives of it too broadly in its obsession with meaning.

The New Critics, like the moralists, make the mistake of assuming that the nature and function of literature can be defined in terms of that single aspect of the whole one happens to be interested in: in their case it is the way language—rather than the content—reflects reality, and this they call "form," the creation of meaning by the balancing and reconciling of opposites, of contrasting attitudes, ideas, and suggestions. But R. S. Crane and Elder Olson, who make much better critics of the New Critics than do the moralists because they understand and share the New Critics' concern with form, have argued cogently that a poem,

[4] "Literature Undefended," *Saturday Review*, 42, (Jan. 31, 1959), 22.

[5] "The New Critics" (1947), *Critiques and Essays in Criticism 1920-1948* (New York, 1949), ed. by Stallman, pp. 488-506, esp. p. 485.

[6] "Foreword" to Stallman's anthology, pp. xv-xxii, esp. p. xix.

[7] "The Unity of *King Lear*" (1948), Stallman, pp. 154-161, esp. pp. 154-155.

although obviously made of words, is also made of other things which the words serve to embody—namely structures other than those of meaning merely, structures of grammar and syntax, of logical implication, and of action and plot. And it is these structures which the New Critics minimize, or else relegate to a non-formal status. Crane and Olson have pointed out, secondly, that it is a curious doctrine which gives language the primary formal status in a poem to the neglect of the poet's artistic purpose, a purpose to which all else in the poem—including its language—seems properly subordinate. And they have shown, in the third place, how vague and general are the formal principles which result from these assumptions. *King Lear* may be about, as Heilman puts it, "the ways in which the human reason may function, and about the imagination," but it is also about a stubborn old man who learns too late the cost of vanity and irresponsibility. There are hundreds of plays which could fit Heilman's formula; what is needed are principles which will enable us to define the differences. The net the New Critics fashion to ensnare form is simply too loose: the butterfly escapes through the holes.[8]

II

I would like to propose a more pluralistic view of poetry and of criticism than either of these: that there are as many valuable questions to ask as there are significant aspects of literature to talk about, and that there are many significant aspects of literature to talk about—the relationship between the poem and the poet, for example, or the poem and the age, or the poem and the reader, or the poem and reality, or the whole and its parts, and so on. Thus form is one question, but not the only one, and morality is another, but neither does it exhaust the possibilities. And there may even be a way of regarding form itself, as I hope to show, which could lead naturally to a discussion of morality and meaning without either blurring the distinctions between form and content or setting them in opposition to each other.

How may this be done? In order to define a poem's form, we must, as even the New Critics agree, be able to show how its parts relate to the whole. And, in order to do this, we must be able to define the particular whole which this poem, and no other, forms. Finally, in order to do this, as the New Critics *don't* agree, we must regard the poem as the voluntary product of an intentional process—intentional in at least the sense that the finished poem answers to some design, whether the poet begins consciously with that design in mind or finds it only as he explores his material—Wimsatt and Beardsley notwithstanding. Using the Aristotelian conception of form as analyzed by Crane and Olson, then, let us regard the poet literally as a maker. The question of form resolves itself accordingly into one of how the content is shaped, of what is done with the material. It is neither the poet's personal and social will which shapes the poem, nor the inherent powers of language, but rather his *artistic* will. We will find, therefore, the cause of the poem's organization and rendition in the specific creative powers of this particular poet as he attempts to solve the specific artistic problems of this particular poem. Although we cannot say what these problems are *in vacuo*, we can nevertheless indicate their general nature, which is that of suiting the parts to the whole. Whatever his purpose may be—whether

[8] See *Critics and Criticism* (Chicago, 1952), ed. by R. S. Crane, esp. Crane's essays on Richards (pp. 27-44) and Brooks (pp. 83-107), Olson's on Empson (pp. 45-82), and W. R. Keast's on Heilman (pp. 108-37). For the theoretical bases of the Chicago position, see Olson's "Outline of Poetic Theory" (pp. 546-566), and Crane's *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto, 1953).

to make a howitzer or a pyramid—his problem as an artist is how to accomplish it effectively.

Form, in this view, is neither the wrapping of the package nor the prize within: the metaphor is entirely inadequate. Neither is it the social message (relation between poem and reader) nor the linguistic meanings (relation between poem and reality), but rather what is done with them and how they are conveyed (relation between parts and whole). We need not either trivialize form by separating it from the material, as does the moral critic, nor magnify it by identifying it with the material, as does the New Critic; we must rather see them as both separate and interdependent. Form cannot exist apart from its embodiment in the material; the material can have no artistic force without its form. The moralist and the New Critic are each looking at form in terms of non-formal distinctions.

From all this, it follows that the formal critic must proceed according to the following principles. If the poet has made the parts of his poem conform to a certain principle of the whole, we may assume that the finished product will bear the marks of this principle, and that the critic, by reversing this process, should be able to recover this principle by working from the parts back to what must be holding them together. If the poet, that is, works from a cause to its effects, the critic may work by inference from these effects back to their cause. His reasoning, then, will go through three phases in order to meet the three conditions of his problem: first, he must carefully assess what he sees before him and analyze it into its parts; second, tossing the possibilities about in his mind, he must come to a hypothesis as to what seems to be holding them together; and third, he must then return to the poem in an effort to test his hypothesis as the one most suitable to this particular poem and no other. He tries to re-think, in other words, the steps the poet must have gone through in order to make these parts conform to this whole, and this will give him a basis for saying this was done because of that, and so on. Let us spell these steps out a bit further.

Although he cannot know in advance, as does the New Critic, what the poem's form will be, our critic must approach it with some possibilities regarding parts and wholes already in mind. And the more the better, if he is to do justice to the detail and uniqueness of the case. One *can* approach a poem with certain terms and definitions in mind—indeed, one *must* if one is to analyze and interpret at all—without limiting what one finds, so long as they are indicative of the possibilities rather than determinative of what one must find, descriptive rather than prescriptive. The Chicago Critics' way of analyzing a poem into its parts is to ask what sort of structure the poem is built on, how it is presented, and by means of what style. The structural possibilities of poetry are diverse: a poem may embody an action of one sort or another, whether large or small, and involving certain agents responding to various situations in ways governed by their thought and character (Frost's "Stopping by Woods"); or it may present an expository statement (Raleigh's "What Is Our Life?"); or it may put forth an argument (Muir's "The Animals")—and each of these has its own distinctive set of parts and systems of relations. Questions regarding the manner of representing this structure involve such problems as determining the point of view, the selection of parts, and their scaling and ordering. Stylistic questions cover such matters, of course, as diction, rhythm, and figures.

Let us illustrate this first step by analyzing Frost's poem into its parts. We should notice, to begin with, that its structure is based on an action, a moment of human experience: the protagonist is

in a situation calling for a decision—he is tempted to stay in the woods, but decides to push on. The development of the poem is governed by the requirements of this little "plot." Further, the protagonist seems to be of an imaginative cast of mind, and in possession—admirable combination!—of a firm and upright moral character. The point of view is that of the protagonist, who speaks in his own voice in the present. The parts have been selected so that the poem begins with his arrival in the woods and ends just before his departure; they have been scaled symmetrically so that each of the four quatrains encompasses one step of the action (the arrival, the sense of isolation, the temptation, and the resolution); and they have been ordered chronologically. And only the obvious points of style can be mentioned here: the conversational diction and syntax in combination with the strict stanzaic pattern.

Once our critic has clarified the parts of the poem in some such way as this, he is ready for the second stage of his analysis: to leap by inference from these parts and their relationships to the governing principle which is holding them together. And here, too, he will need a descriptive rather than a prescriptive set of possibilities to keep in mind. In the case of a poem built around a human action, the end effect may be to move our emotions in a certain way, to awaken, that is, our human capacity to respond to the behavior and fortunes of men (Frost's "Desert Places"); or it may be to influence our opinions and ideas by subordinating the action to an implied doctrine, as in exempla, parables, and allegories (Cummings' "next to of course god america i"). In the case of an exposition, the end may be to present some universal truth in a distinctive manner (MacLeish's "Ars Poetica"), or to clarify the nature of a particular preference (Herrick's "Delight in Disorder"), and so on. In the case of an argument, finally, the end will be to persuade the reader to adopt a certain policy, attitude, or idea (Dickinson's "Tell All the Truth").

Let us look again at our example. As we survey its parts, what seems to be holding them together? The poet's attempt to present a certain kind of action which is to be viewed by the reader in a specific emotional light. Frost's poem is governed by his presentation of a man making a difficult choice, one which the reader must admire and sympathize with, since the protagonist is not only making the "right" choice—that is, the one requiring the most will-power (as opposed to the one made, for example, by Eliot's Prufrock)—but is also aware of what it costs in terms of his imaginative responsiveness to life. But there is still more to it, for he is as aware of the possibility of danger in surrendering to nature's appeal as he is of her loveliness. The responsibilities he chooses to commit himself to at the end are not simply alternatives to nature's beauty: they give whatever meaning and purpose to life which man's existence has to offer. Frost is not a Romantic, and we know from his other poems that nature can be as empty and chaotic as she can be lovely, and the threat lurks here as well—especially in "darkest evening of the year," "dark and deep."

Thus does the possession of a range of poetic possibilities aid the critic in making the leap from the details of the poem to its probable shaping principle. However, his next problem is to be sure he has the right one—or at least the most likely one—and this requires a basic knowledge of the essentials of hypothetical reasoning. Any hypothesis is to be accepted or rejected in terms of its explanatory powers. In order to subsume a variety of parts under a single organizing principle, certain conditions must be met: the hypothesis must account for all of the relevant details, it must do so coherently, and it must do so economi-

cally. And it must do these things better than the possible alternative ways of explaining the case. Each hypothesis, then, must be formulated and tested experimentally, it must be compared to its competitors, and it must be held tentatively. Nothing is easier, when these conditions are ignored, as so much of modern criticism demonstrates, than to find evidence in the poem to support in circular fashion any improbably hypothesis, or any number of different hypotheses.

What are the explanatory powers of our hypothesis? Let us see how it provides answers to a few formal questions. Why does the decision go this way rather than that? To arouse our admiration for the protagonist. Why is he made sensitive to the beauties he is resisting? To arouse our sympathy. Why is he made to speak in the first person? For the sake of vividness and immediacy. Why are the parts selected, scaled, and ordered in just this way? To focus clearly and yet intensely on the moment of choice and its causes. Why this conversational yet strict style? To reinforce the speaker's peculiar combination of sensitivity and moral determination. Much more could be said, but space allows only this barest of indications of how such testing would proceed.

III

It may be thought, however, in making my own conception of form more narrow than that of the New Critics, that I have opened up *myself* to the charge of triviality. What value do I think this conception has in the classroom and in the larger scheme of things, a conception that I have been so careful to keep broad but not too broad, narrow but not too narrow?

In the first place, in view of my emphasis upon the rigors of hypothetical reasoning, I might offer as a sufficiently lofty goal the attempt to develop in students a respect for responsible thinking. Although to teach students how to think is an aim expressed by everybody, there are very few teachers outside of the logic course itself who actually take the trouble to show how it's done. But even if they did, logic is not affectionately regarded by most literary men today, and they would probably oppose such an infringement upon their imaginative domain. I would reply that, since they are engaged in the work of interpretation, they ought to be more interested in the ways in which interpretations and the things interpreted may be brought closer together. As I have shown, the safe recovery of the shaping principle calls for more than a nodding acquaintance with the responsibilities of hypothetical reasoning.

Rather than going on to point out that logic is a means and not an end, a tool of inquiry rather than a way of life, and that it is inevitably operative—even if erroneously—when we would argue against logic itself, let me seek to occupy more popular grounds. I think this approach, because of its insistence upon flexibility and variety, can teach our students—and ourselves—a respect for the integrity of the work itself. Since this program calls for fitting the theory to the work rather than the work to the theory, the work itself is the constant court of appeal—or, as Brooks says, the "ultimate sanction"—not so much as a source of evidence to confirm our theories as an unyielding presence with which we must come to terms. Coxe and Chapman, in their dramatization of Melville's *Billy Budd*, claim it is a sign of greatness in an author that he can be made to tell future generations what they want to hear.[9] I think contrariwise, as one of my students remarked in discussing Coxe and Chapman, that it is rather a sign of greatness in future gen-

[9] Louis P. Coxe and Robert Chapman, "Notes on the Play," *Billy Budd* (Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 57-58.

erations that they can uncover what the author was actually trying to say for himself.

Respect for responsible thinking as well as for the integrity of the work are some of the ingredients comprising, I take it, the truly educated mind. And perhaps the educated mind will play as important part in saving us—if we can be saved—as the moral enthusiasm of Trilling, Kazin, and Peyre. It seems to me that if literary men are going to help save us, they had best approach that problem as Mill said we should approach happiness, indirectly—through the avenues opened up by their own proper training and experience. I do not mean to split up an already fragmented world further apart when I urge a less amateur approach to the problems of our culture, but I do think we ought not to deal in pieces and remnants from other fields of study. If a true synthesis is to be achieved, and I believe it must, it will only be achieved by minds sufficiently powerful not merely to combine an expertness in many fields but also to see where one leaves off and another begins. It may be true that the sterility of our lives has as one of its causes the mushrooming of modern technology, but I hardly think we can be saved by beating our pyramids into howitzers. Our culture is still not suffering from an excess of reason.

But let me try to take still higher ground. What this approach aims to bring to the fore, in its emphasis upon the artist as maker, is an appreciation of the creative powers of the poet—not as a psychologist, moralist, philosopher, or historian, but as a shaper, an artist. Of course, the psychologist, moralist, philosopher, and historian—as well as all other interpreters of man and his world—are makers and shapers too. As Kenneth Burke points out, literature shares certain mental tools, such as "contrast, comparison, metaphor, series, pathos, chiasmus, [that] are based upon our modes of understanding anything," with any intellectual endeavor, for "they are implicit in the processes of abstraction and generalization by which we think."[10] When properly understood, and it is too frequently not understood in the classroom, any study of a subject represents one way of shaping that subject, of giving it form. And it is this sort of understanding that teaches us about our humanity, for surely we are human by virtue of our capacity to interpret and give shape to our experience.

But the poet differs from these others because he works primarily through the imagination rather than the intellect, although no good scientist can afford to dispense with his imagination, nor is a poet necessarily great because he dispenses with his intellect. What he is after is not so much to explain experience as to render it. His genius is manifested not so much in the depth and breadth of his insights into life as in the way he can bend these insights into service as he solves his artistic problems. It is not his insight we value but what he *does* with it. The conclusion of Faulkner's *The Old Man*, for example, where after much hardship the convict returns the woman and the boat and places himself back into custody, is admirable not because it enjoins fortitude and resignation upon us or because it reveals how much Faulkner knows about life, but rather because it strikes us as the most artistically satisfying way—among the possible alternatives—of ending the story in terms of what went before and of what appears to be the intended effect of the whole. Of course, Faulkner had to know a lot about life to begin with, but he also had to know a lot about writing stories. We may admire and learn from his vision of life, but this is not the same thing as saying he writes in order to display that vision. He writes in order to create the best novels he can manage.

[10] "Lexicon Rhetoricae" (1931), Stallman, pp. 234-249, esp. pp. 243-244.

Although I am concerned with locating the formal principle of a work, it certainly cannot be said that I am separating the poem from life. Since my conception of form is based on whatever discriminations we can make in the poem among thought, character, and action, and among the various ways these can be shaped to affect the reader's emotions and opinions, it is precisely certain human attitudes, ideas, and experiences which that principle is organizing, and it is precisely that organizing which is the result of the most human of our powers. Nor am I stretching my conception of form to include everything in the world, for I am looking for the ways in which the attitudes, ideas, and experiences are shaped into distinctive poetic wholes rather than for the way they "can be extended," in Brooks's words, "to the largest symbolizations possible."

Thus, when we talk about Salinger, one of Kazin's favored new prophets, we could discuss the problem of lovelessness in our society with as much humanistic urgency as Peyre could wish, but we should then try to lead the discussion by degrees back to a consideration of how this problem functions in the shaping of a particular novel or story. We might even want to argue with our students about the relevance to life of Salinger's anguish, but our real job as English teachers should be to show how a blindness to the meaning of this anguish will prevent us from understanding the artistic powers of Salinger's work. Or, when we talk about Shakespeare, we could discuss the ways in which the paradoxical language gives rise to and embodies such issues as appearance and reality or reason and imagination, but we should then try to lead the discussion gently back to a consideration of how this language and these symbolizations function in the whole play. For plot and character are as much a part of the whole as language and theme.

The real goal, as I have said, is to steer between these two opposing camps; we should aim to avoid the distortions of each. And I can do no better than to conclude with these words of R. S. Crane: "We can agree, therefore, with the critics who hold that we ought to deal with poetry as poetry and not another thing, and we can agree no less with those who insist that one of the main tasks of criticism is to show the 'relevance' of poems to life; only these, for us, are not two tasks but one."[11]

[11] *The Languages of Criticism,* pp. 189-190.